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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: THE GRINCH WHO STOLE HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. To celebrate Human Rights Day 2005, Post planned for a roundtable discussion with Tajik students on the Department's annual Human Rights Report. Initially, the selected venue was Dushanbe's premier university, the Russia-funded Russian-Tajik Slavonic University. After complications, Post changed the location to the Tajik Technical University. In both cases the rectors, teachers, and students showed desire and excitement to meet with EmbOffs to discuss Human Rights. In both cases, the Russian Embassy and the Tajik MFA returned the next day with fabricated excuses that canceled the planned discussions. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) With few native English speakers in Tajikistan, university students, faculty members, and rectors alike relish the opportunity to meet with EmbOffs to discuss all manner of issues. The students are typically energetic, opinionated, and willing to discuss sensitive issues that their government brethren smile at politely and ignore. Russian-Tajik Slavonic University students have been particularly amenable in the past to such forums and, though often dramatically pro-Russian in their views, are always willing to debate and discuss. When the idea for a student-focused Human Rights roundtable came up, they were the first students that Post thought of.

13. (SBU) Slavonic's Deputy Rector, editor of independent weekly "Biznis i Politika," and an active partner with Post's PAS, Rahmon Ulmasov, initially welcomed the idea and began planning for the discussion. He asked for our assistance to clear the event with the Public Affairs section of the Russian Embassy. (NOTE: Russian-Tajik Slavonic University is funded directly from the Russian Duma, and the Russian Embassy acts as the final decision-maker on such events. END NOTE.) Post's PAS contacted their colleagues in the Russian Embassy and also received a positive first reaction. Ulmasov called back the next day, however, and coyly informed PAS that due to a VIP visit from Russia, the students would not be able to meet on Monday, the scheduled discussion day. PAS demurred and asked to do it later in the week, at their convenience. Ulmasov responded, "The students will be busy then too." PAS got the hint.

14. (SBU) PAS next turned to Tajik Technical University and its rector, father of a FLEX student who also worked at Post, quickly agreed to a Human Rights discussion, set aside a lecture hall for the event, and informed students from the International Relations and Economics Departments. All he asked was for an okay from the Tajik MFA. Post sent a request simply for a "discussion with students" and followed up with a call to the MFA's Embassy contact, Ismat Nasredinov, who yet again gave an initial go ahead for the event, albeit without knowing the topic of the discussion. With everything in motion, Post finally believed it had arranged a workable Human Rights roundtable.

15. (SBU) Though the day before Post was in the clear, the next day, the Tajik MFA sent a diplomatic note informing Post that Monday the students would be too busy for a roundtable discussion "to be postponed until the beginning of 2006." PAS called Tajik Technical University to inquire what happened and find out how the decision that the students were "too busy" came from the MFA rather than their own rector. The rector informed PAS that he had been called several times by people within the government and told to postpone the event indefinitely.

16. (SBU) Post protested to the MFA with the following diplomatic note in response to this heavy-handed, even if lightly worded, refusal to discuss Human Rights with Tajik students.

Begin text:

(Complimentary opening) The Embassy expresses its astonishment and sharp disappointment that certain elements of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan on December 9 ordered the rector

of Tajik Technical University to cancel a roundtable discussion between students and U.S. diplomats planned for December 12 to mark the annual United Nations-sponsored World Human Rights Day.

While this kind of heavy-handed action might be expected from another country in the region, it is unworthy of a progressive state like the Republic of Tajikistan. (Complimentary closing)

End text.

17. (SBU) COMMENT. PAS, as arranged with the university previously, went ahead and delivered English and Russian copies of the Tajikistan section of the 2004 Human Rights Report to the students who were scheduled to meet on Monday as "English-language material." In general, Tajikistan is not Uzbekistan, and when the mood permits we are allowed to meet with students, discuss sensitive issues, and distribute such things as the Department's Human Rights Report. And in this Human Rights Report season, Post will be sure to include such moves against openness in this year's update - and inform our MFA colleagues, mindful of reports on Tajikistan, that Tajikistan's reputation is built for better or worse, on seemingly small decisions such as this that signal to the world community Tajikistan's readiness to do business. END COMMENT.
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